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Music Video Creation and Auteursism

by

Dylan Paris

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

Film

Thesis Adviser

Professor Matt McCormick

Portland State University

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ABSTRACT: My thesis project is a music video for a song I wrote and recorded called “Mad King”. The themes of the song revolve around my fears and anger towards our current presidential administration and the constant threat of death from nuclear war. The video combines footage of myself playing multiple characters in a near future based on my fears and anxieties. Along with the footage of myself, additional found footage is overlaid into the piece. This footage includes rallies, North Korean military parades, the inauguration of Donald Trump, test footage of the “Mother Of All Bombs”, and lastly alpha footage of nuclear explosions that I used to create a simulated nuclear attack on Portland.

RESEARCH QUESTION: How does the making of a music video allow a musician to creatively interact with their fans?

I chose this research question to frame the practical work I would be undertaking through the creation of a music video. As a creative thesis, my work would mostly be focused on the process of making a piece of visual and musical art. The research question would help frame my search for sources and serve as a lens through which to analyze my final project.

BACKGROUND: Music videos as a form of visual media have existed in some form or another since the 1960’s. They came into full fruition in the 1980’s with the advent of MTV. The popularity of the music video as a format substantially changed what it meant to be a musician. Gone were the days of a talented singer songwriter sitting with their guitar and recording their heart and soul to sell on vinyl and broadcast on the radio. In place of the singer songwriter was the fully formed aurally and visually immaculate Pop Star. The music video served as the mechanism through which an artist could deliver a fully formed vision of who they were directly to their audience. With the shift of MTV from a primarily music based channel to a reality TV centric destination, music videos shifted from the TV to the internet. Nowadays most folks are

watching videos on sites like VEVO and YouTube, with some videos racking views up into the billions.

Artists still utilize this form for many reasons. One reason is one that has remained true since the MTV heydays, the ability to present an image of themselves directly to their fans. Creating a music video serves to craft a visual memory to the sound of your work. Artists like Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar are crafting deeply political and technically masterful works that speak on race relations in America and the intricacies of American life through the lens of their unique experiences as members of traditionally oppressed groups while also being in the upper realms of wealth and fame.

Not many artists are also the directors of their own videos. Most rely on the skills and visions of directors like Spike Jonze, Hype Williams, and others who have innovated while producing commercially successful works. There are some artists who have directed their own videos, including Tyler The Creator, Rihanna, Lady Gaga, and many others who have had a clear amount of input and control in the creation of the videos such as Kendrick Lamar, Beyoncé, and Childish Gambino.

The music video today serves as a source of revenue, which is a contrast to music videos in the 1980s which served to sell records. Today streaming music is how most people consume music, and YouTube plays count towards the Billboard 100. A good video can generate money and attention in an industry that is struggling to keep up with the technological changes of the 21st century.

RELATION TO SIGNIFICANT WORK IN THE FIELD: My hope with this project was to create a video for one of my own songs and in so doing contribute my own work to the greater

field of the music video. As both a musician and a filmmaker, I had the opportunity to craft a holistic vision for this song and myself as an artist. This is my most vital tool in communicating with a potential audience. I didn't think that I would reach the heights of auteurs like Childish Gambino, Beyoncé, or Kendrick Lamar, but I hoped that the practice of making a music video would help me understand some of the elements that go into making something of that caliber and scope.

ORIGINAL CONCEPT PITCH: "My video will be for a song I wrote this term called "Mad King". The song is about a near future in which our current political climate has increased in fascist aggression. The titular "Mad King" should be easy to infer given our current leadership. I don't outright name names in the song because as much as it's about my personal experiences and fears with our current leadership, it is also applicable to many situations of oppression and oligarchical leadership. There is apocalyptic imagery in the song which stems from my own feelings and the feelings of many people I know who are struggling to feel like this country and world even wants us around.

The video will pull from the catastrophic imagery of the song. It will contrast traditional music video song and dance style performance with images of nuclear bombs blowing up, personalities fracturing, news reporters struggling to comprehend the severity of the situations they find themselves in. The second verse of my song revolves around two parents explaining their racist and fascist views to their child. I will recreate this scene by either casting actors to play the parents or playing them myself. These parents do not represent caricatures of my own, but rather the large swath of the country who voted for someone who actively harms so many different groups of people who don't fit the white, cis-gender, straight, affluent, and evangelical framework in which they live.

The video will touch on my own experiences as someone who identifies as agender, meaning not a man or woman. We have leaders who actively believe I shouldn't be allowed to live. Our own president allegedly joked that the vice president wants to "hang the gays". Fascists march in the streets of cities across America and the world. This video serves as an artistic response to these events and my own anxieties about how to live in a country that seems to actively despise me."

EXPECTED FINDINGS: "I expect to finish the video entirely by the middle of Spring 2018.

Through the process of creating the video I hope to gain a better understanding of the many components that make up the process, and to increase my skills in as many of those areas as possible. I also expect to have a greater understanding of how to attach visual elements to musical works. These mediums have a rich history of interaction. Increasing my awareness of the creation process will help me make more detailed and high-quality work in the future."

PRODUCTION DIARY / SUMMARY: The first step of the project was to compose the original song. I spent a lot of fall term 2017 experimenting with different sounds and ideas. I eventually settled on a more hip-hop inspired beat I had been working on since the night after Donald Trump won the presidency. The feeling of the beat was extremely ominous and inspired me to write lyrics that matched the darkness of the music. I thought about all the heinous actions being taken by the new administration, some of which affected me, all of which affected others. We were and still are living under the leadership of someone who seems to actively despise over half the population of their own country.

I have been hesitant to work directly in the field of rap as an artist for the last few years. There is some good discourse around appropriation, and finding the boundaries between homage, inspiration, and cultural appropriation has proven difficult for me. With this song, I decided to focus on a more operatic singing style in the vein of an artist like Anohni. Combining that

singing style with the beat created something that felt more inspired and original than just attempting to recreate the wonderful work done by artists like Kendrick Lamar, Run the Jewels, and others.

The lyrics of the song were primarily based around my own perspectives and fears under the Trump administration. The first verse touches on reconciling my own feelings of absence and withdrawal from music and social circles in the face of fear.

MAD KING

VERSE 1:

"I know I've been gone

Lost in my thoughts, for too long

I'm not feeling strong

Cause maybe this was pointless all along

So much hope before

Now it's total war

Tyrants scream upon our screens and knock upon our doors

So long

Let's hope someday again to carry on

Til then the song goes..."

This verse is the modern context of my emotional state during the making of the song. Where the rest of the song goes into future fears, this is the starting point. The chorus is far more focused on a future scenario of chaos and civil strife, inspired by the events in Charleston and the actions of ICE.

MAD KING

CHORUS:

"I run, back in a bad dream

I'm gone, you can't even find me

These bombs, going off around me

The alarms, ringing through the back streets

You scream, nothing is the same again

Hail the king, save us from his arrogance

Blood streams, boots in the storm sing

As we scream, who can stop the mad king? "

This chorus paints the picture of a chaos that didn't feel very distant from our own reality when I was writing the song. Bombs go off in the distance, alarms ring through the streets of the city, fascists march in the streets unstoppable, millions of people wonder what we can do to stop the chaos caused by the illogical leadership of the administration. It's from this chorus that I draw out further the idea of a nuclear bomb hitting the city in the video. The tensions between the US and North Korea were at a fever pitch at the time of writing and concepting. Those tensions

appear to be lowering (hopefully), and good lord do I hope so, because living in that much fear is almost unbearable.

The second verse of the song was the trickiest to write. It is from the perspective of someone like my uncle, who absorbs Fox News and fake memes spread on Facebook. Our relationship had become extremely strained after the election. The words of verse two are not written from his perspective exactly however, they are more those of the kinds of people who grabbed his attention.

MAD KING

VERSE 2:

"Son I hope you know

That there's bloodshed yet to come

And the drums

Pound across the hills aligned with guns.

Honey can't you see?

You know we can't be free

While there's people in the world who do not live like we?

So Long

Oh Sire hold us close within your arms

Until our time comes"

The real trick with this verse is trying to write from a perspective I find abhorrent without glorifying it. To take the ridiculousness of xenophobia and nationalism and lay it out with a dry bareness contrasted against the visceral nature of the fear within the other parts of the song. However, this verse is also about fear. It serves to point out the fear that drives hatred, but hopefully doesn't create empathy due to the horrific nature of the thought processes. This is also the trickiest part of the song to adapt to video. The final written component was the bridge or breakdown between the second chorus and the third.

MAD KING

BRIDGE / BREAKDOWN:

"Fuck the tyrants, fuck the tyrants

Fuck the racist cowards driving by with sirens

Fuck the tyrants, fuck the tyrants

Fuck the politicians saying I should die quick

Fuck the ultra rich, fuck the markets

Fuck the oligarchs who'd let us die for paper

Fuck the system, who blames the victim

And fuck the ones who chose this coward as their savior

Motherfuckers"

This part is where all the subtlety goes out the window. It's a kind of bloodletting and a direct targeting of the people I've alluded to throughout the song. The original concept for the video

had five instances of me piling up in the same shot to deliver the lines as my voices layered. This ended up being three instances with multiple cutaways, but the overall effect is the same, a chorus of my anger being directed outward.

Once the song was complete, I wrapped up work on my prospectus and moved into Winter term with a plan to finish my video pre-production documents quickly and spin up production within the middle of the term. This didn't exactly pan out, but with some helpful pushing from my advisor Professor McCormick, I was able to complete preproduction and layout a plan for production and post-production by the end of Winter term. Pre-production was all about concepting out the video, creating storyboards, getting together a list of locations, and blocking out a shooting schedule for the production process. This work was actually some of the most mentally strenuous as it required the most brainstorming and concepting, taking the words and ideas in my song and translating them into visual imagery.

The balance with this project was trying to hone in on the ideas of the thesis, how could I best represent myself as an artist while creating a compelling visual art piece that not only sold my music but also my ideas? I found myself constantly questioning the project as a whole, damning the me of the past for sticking us with such ominous and pessimistic concepts with which to form a narrative.

Just about anyone in visual media production will tell you that a lot changes between the ideas-oriented stage of pre-production and the realities presented by the production stage. By the end of Winter term, I had a script, storyboards, shooting schedule, and a director of photography signed on to help me bring the project to life. The original script included a cast of actors besides myself. These actors would portray a red-state family under verbal siege from the family patriarch and a debate moderator and hardline extreme republican candidate in a debate. When

talking with my DP Markus Lim, who provided amazing support in the production stage, we decided to ditch the sections that would have required other actors. This was primarily due to budgetary and time constraints.

The choice to remove the family and debate sections created a new challenge for how to pull off verse two while removing myself from the words being sung. I decided to purchase a wig, tie, and dress shirt to complete the look of a corrupt politician bloviating at the camera. Markus was inspired to fill his living room with fog and push lights through the air to create a fantastical dreamlike mise-en-scene for the diatribe.

The rest of filming was fairly routine and well executed. My past filmmaking endeavors have not had the amount of time and planning that this one did. The time I had allotted allowed me to create a schedule of reasonable shoot days, each only three hours max, and four in total. My job as a coordinator on PSU campus allowed me the privilege to pay Markus and my assistant camera Octavia Wade for their time. This wasn't even close to market value but was much more than most are paid for student projects, which is often nothing. I have found myself frustrated working with some peers who continue to perpetuate the free labor mentality of Hollywood. Not a single computer science major I've ever met would ever consider working for free, even in an internship. I would like to see film majors adopt a similar mentality. Trading labor for labor is one thing but offering work for "exposure" is exploitation by another name.

We shot the video over the course of a month and a half, with four separate filming days. The first took place in a parking garage on campus. We recorded footage at 3K resolution and 48 frames per second. This would allow the footage to be played back at half speed and retain the classic cinematic frame rate of 24 fps. To compensate for this, I had to create a version of the song that played back at double the speed and lip-synch to it. This was difficult but resulted in a

compelling cinematic image. The camera we used for this project was Markus' personal RED. It is an extremely high-end device and allowed for a very clean and professional final product.

Per my advisor's wisdom, we filmed me lip-synching the entire song multiple times at every location. This would allow me to create a video from a single shoot day if necessary. Obviously the final product would have been less compelling but it served as a safety measure in case anything happened that would stop production permanently. Luckily, we were able to hit every shoot day, even if the last one was a few weeks behind schedule.

Once May 1st arrived, I moved into post-production. Even without all of my footage captured I had enough to start work on the editing process. This was crucial as the video relied on intricate edits and some 3D modeling work. I had started preliminary 3D work early in Spring term but moved into high gear around week 5. I modeled an old school TV in 3DS Max, and then brought it into Substance Painter to texture and render it out. I used footage that I filmed on shoot day 4, with me dressed as a political pundit in a red room full of smoke and composited it onto the 3D render of the tv in a living room.

The other major component of post-production was the simulation of a nuclear blast in Portland. We filmed footage of me on council crest reacting to the blast, after that I took it into After Effects and started layering alpha footage of bombs with other effects to simulate the explosion. This was the trickiest part of the post process as it is the most fantastical element. Getting it wrong can take viewers out of the experience, or worse, make them laugh. (add more)

I showed a version of the video to my thesis advisor and he had excellent feedback regarding the repetitive nature of the piece. He suggested I add another element, found footage, to increase the variety of subjects which before had mostly been me in different locations and outfits. With this

guidance I sought out footage to overlay on the virtual tv, reference points to tie back into the fears and context that had motivated this project. Obviously, I included footage of Trump, Pence, and Un. Along with them I added footage of Michael Cohn, Robert Mueller, Richard Spencer getting socked in the face (top 5 films of all time), and Joe Arpaio. I overlaid this footage on to a 3D model of a tv, but then during the final breakdown before the last chorus I started moving the footage off the tv and overlaying it onto the images of me to create a more psychedelic effect. This became my favorite part of the piece.

The stage I am at now is my first draft completion. I am proud of the work I have done but can see areas where I can improve. Hopefully with McCormick's feedback I will get it to the final goal post and wrap up this near yearlong project. I am proud of what I've done so far, and excited to see how it ends up in its final form.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

This bibliography is a mix of academic peer reviewed articles and videos that served as inspiration for my work.

ARTICLES:

Annesley, James. "Being Spike Jonze: Intertextuality and Convergence in Film, Music Video and Advertising." *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, vol. 11, no. 1, Mar. 2013, pp. 23-37. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1386/ncin.11.1.23_1.

This article is an examination of Spike Jonze, my primary influence when it comes to making music videos. He is someone who had a huge impact on the medium and has also had

great success in the film industry, making such films as “Being John Malkovich”, “Where the Wild Things Are” and “Her”. The article breaks down the interactions between his work in film, advertising, and music video, as well as some history of him and his work. This article is important for my work as it helps show why Spike is such an important figure in the medium.

HOLT, FABIAN. "Is Music Becoming More Visual? Online Video Content in the Music Industry." *Visual Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, Mar. 2011, pp. 50-61. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/1472586X.2011.548489.

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Thornton, Corliss and Janée Burkhalter. "Must Be the Music: Examining the Placement Effects of Character-Brand Association and Brand Prestige on Consumer Brand Interest within the Music Video Context." *Journal of Promotion Management*, vol. 21, no. 1, Jan/Feb2015, pp. 126-141. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/10496491.2014.971212.

Wallis, Cara. “Performing Gender: A Content Analysis of Gender Display in Music Videos.” *Sex Roles*, vol. 64, no. 3-4, 2010, pp. 160–172., doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9814-2.

This piece takes a look at the representations of traditional / stereotypical gender display in music videos. It examines hundreds of videos to look at how men and women are portrayed on the screen. Although the piece is built around the gender binary, it works as a reference point for some of what I am doing in my video. A key point behind the politics of the song and video I am

creating is gender identity and the way gender is treated in our current political climate. This piece fits my project and research question by showing how gender display has been used in many videos of the past.

Prody, Jessica M. "Protesting War and Hegemonic Masculinity in Music Videos: Audioslave's "Doesn't Remind Me"." *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 38, no. 4, Dec. 2015, pp. 440-461. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/07491409.2015.1085475.

Brammer, John Paul. "Donald Trump Reportedly Joked about VP Mike Pence Wanting to 'Hang' Gays." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 17 Oct. 2017, www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/trump-reportedly-jokes-about-mike-pence-wanting-hang-gays-n811086.

Way, Lyndon C. S. "YouTube as a Site of Debate through Populist Politics: The Case of a Turkish Protest Pop Video." *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, vol. 10, no. 2, May 2015, pp. 180-196. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/17447143.2015.1041965.

VIDEOS / FILMS:

Jonze, Spike, director. *Director's Series, Vol. 1 - The Work of Director Spike Jonze*. 2003.

Matsoukas, Melina, director. "Formation" - Beyonce. Parkwood / Columbia, 2016. A part of "Lemonade" - Beyonce

Formation is part of arguably the most important music video piece of all time, Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. It is an examination of black womanhood and race relations in America. It

is multilayered and extremely well choreographed and directed. Lemonade as a whole stands as a masterwork in the genre, building on the cinematic promise of early long form videos like Thriller but adding so many layers of meaning and subtext, as well as run time. I am not going to be pulling much from this video for my own, but it stands as a milestone in the medium and must be mentioned.

Jonze, Spike, director. "The Suburbs" – Arcade Fire. Merge, 2011.

Jonze, Spike, director. "Drop" - The Pharcyde. 1995.

An earlier Spike Jonze work. The Pharcyde are a rap group who were a little more avant garde than some of their contemporaries. Spike and the group worked to film a unique video to match their aural aesthetic. The group memorized their entire song played backwards so that the video could be played back in reverse, showing the members moving in reverse but rapping the lyrics properly. I would like to inject a similar level of creativity into my own work for this thesis project.

Jonze, Spike, director. Fatboy Slim - Weapon Of Choice. Skint Records, 2000.

In this video, Jonze directs actor Christopher Walken as a man dancing in what appears to be a lavish hotel lobby. The choreography of the dancing, and the fantastical style have stuck with me since I first saw this video as a kid. I'm hoping capture some of that magic in my own piece, which will admittedly be much darker than the work in this video.

Murai, Hiro, director. Childish Gambino – Sober. 2015.

For the most part, I am using this video as another example of placing dance in a strange and subversive context. Whereas Donald Glover does this in a diner, making a woman

uncomfortable and trying to win her over, I will be placing dance in the context of a war zone in near future Portland.

West, Kanye, director. Kanye West – Runaway. Def Jam. 2010.

Probably the most important reference for what I am hoping to achieve. Although the visuals, themes, and runtime of the video are not exactly what I'll be aiming for, the fact that the director of the video is also the artist makes it a rare direct match for the process I will be following for my thesis video. As the artist and the director, Kanye West is able to form a cohesive whole for his vision of how his own music should be represented. His work is a 30 minute short film which highlights many moments from his album "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy" whereas I will only be making one roughly five minute video for a single track. Regardless, I find his work to be one of the most inspiring videos I have ever seen as an artist, along with Lemonade and the recent works of Kendrick Lamar. This relates to my research question as it is an example of an artist directly creating the visual component that his audience experiences when listening to his music.

Update 5/7/2018: I will keep this part of the bibliography intact as it was when I wrote it in November of 2017. It is worth noting that given Kanye's recent behaviors he now essentially represents much of what I was fighting against in the work in my project. Watching the downfall of my greatest hero has been another heartbreaking moment in a series of years that seem to be relentlessly cruel.

Geusebroek, Paul, director. Designer – Panda. GOOD Music. 2016

Kendrick Lamar – Element. 2017

Kendrick Lamar – HUMBLE. 2017

Kendrick Lamar – DNA. 2017

These three videos from Kendrick Lamar represent, in my opinion, the highest quality videos of this year (2017). There is a level of experimentation and artistic quality that is not often seen in the form, similar to Kendrick's work in music.